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SUCCESS IN THE SOLOMONS: LITTORAL WARFARE LESSONS LEARNED

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Historical Background.....	3
The Vision.....	7
The Doctrine.....	10
The Reality.....	12
Recommendation.....	14
Conclusion.....	16
Endnotes.....	18
Bibliography.....	19

Abstract of

SUCCESS IN THE SOLOMONS: LITTORAL WARFARE LESSONS LEARNED

The United States Navy envisions future surface warfare occurring primarily in littoral regions. Currently, the methods employed for training combatant ships do not provide the necessary core competencies for near-shore combat. Additionally, there is an absence of doctrine that mandates standard procedures for littoral action. Therefore, the Joint Task Force Exercise (JTFEX) scenario should be modified to reflect a more land-centric operation and doctrine should be developed to direct standard procedures and guide OPTASK development.

## Introduction

Preparation for future hostilities will forever challenge the minds of those who seek to achieve a military readiness that ensures victory upon initial contact with the enemy. But inescapably, when shaping a force to counter an unknown foe, there is guesswork involved. However, global assessments of worst-case scenarios coupled with analytical decision models can assist in force structure planning and capability development. Nevertheless, in the absence of full-scale war, old ways and routine planning seem to dampen the readiness to fight and win on the first day of conflict. As a counter argument, the United States has shown throughout its history that it requires little time to ramp up to a high level of warfighting skill and effectiveness.

Today the United States Navy faces the challenge of developing surface warfare proficiency for operating in near-shore environments. But, there is a contradiction in the vision of future surface action and the acceptable training standards for which combatant ships prepare to fight. Further, there is an absence of doctrine that mandates a prescient for operations in the littorals.

Through historical research, elements of future surface warfare can be seen in past campaigns. These examples can be used to draw parallels to possible future confrontations. With that in mind and through capitalizing on recorded innovation and leadership, changes may be applied to current training methods that will mitigate some readiness shortfalls prior to combat operations in the littorals.

While the U.S. Navy continues to patrol far-reaching sectors of the earth, the world has become increasingly antagonistic toward its presence on the seas. Similarly, the post-Cold War era has escalated global instability and promoted weapons procurement to once

dissuaded nations. Since power projection is a critical component of naval capability, operating naval combatant ships near shore is a necessity. Clearly, the U.S. Navy has a vested interest in survivability, sustainability, and combat power in the littoral regions of the world.

The following research will explore the Solomon Islands Campaign during the early years of World War II in the Pacific Theater. This campaign offers a snapshot of initial readiness deficiencies in an environment that mirrors the projected littoral battlespace of the future. From the surface action, salient points will be extracted and incremental trends will be identified. Then, the Navy's concept of future operations and joint doctrinal hierarchy will be reviewed. Through this examination, an absence of littoral doctrine to reinforce an overarching concept of operations is illustrated. Finally, a comparison will be made between the Navy's vision for the future and current methods for surface combatant training. It will become evident that a delta exists between training methodology and future proficiency requirements. After capturing these details, lessons learned will be applied to current training models with recommendations for process improvement and the addition of more realistic training scenarios.

## **Historical Background**

The Solomon Islands Campaign took place between August 1942 and November 1943 and resulted in the seizure of Japanese advancement into the Southwestern Pacific. It included numerous major operations such as the amphibious landings at Guadalcanal and Bougainville and decisive naval battles including Santa Cruz, Vella Gulf, and Cape St. George. The initiation of the Solomon Islands Campaign was a direct result of the global strategy of World War II. Germany was the most dangerous enemy but joint

strategic planners also believed that Japanese expansion must be slowed and hopefully stopped.<sup>1</sup> As the Japanese Empire expanded into the Southwestern Pacific, the United States and her allies strongly believed that without an aggressive stance in the Solomon Islands the growth of Japanese influence would rapidly continue.

At this point in the war in the Pacific, the Imperial Japanese Navy was at its best with respect to proficiency in night surface action and operational maneuver in confined waters. On the contrary, the U.S. Navy had much to learn in the tactical employment of surface combatants in such close quarters. However, naval leaders applied creative ideas that would shape the environment and eventually gain the advantage in time and potency at sea. At the same time, repeated contact with Japanese ships forced the Navy to learn and adjust while remaining offensive.

The gap between readiness of American combatants and their performance expectations was recognized by Captain Morton L. Deyo of the CINCPAC staff in a memorandum to Admiral Nimitz. Specifically, his concerns resided with the training of Task Force Six Seven and their unsatisfactory performance in the Savo Island defeat. He wrote that the training of the cruisers and destroyers was unrealistic. As a recommendation, he suggested the formation of a semi-permanent Pacific cruiser-destroyer group for the sole purpose of training, especially in night fighting, followed by tasking in the Slot to break up Admiral Tanaka's Tokyo Express.<sup>2</sup> With strong agreement among American naval leadership that surface combatant performance must be improved, the destroyer force became the focal point of training reform.

The Commander, Destroyer Squadron-Slot (COMDESSLOT), Captain Arleigh Burke assumed ownership of the destroyer-training problem. It was here that badly needed new

ideas for Solomon Islands fighting were tried and tested. When available, Third Fleet destroyers reported to COMDESSLOT where they were employed in the development of fighting concepts for DDs in narrow seas. Captain Burke studied every post-action report from over a year's worth of documents and sought information from all officers in the DESRON. Soon, the grim picture in the Solomon Islands began to reverse and gradually Arleigh Burke's ideas gained acceptance throughout the surface combatants.<sup>3</sup> As a result, American forces slowed the Japanese momentum and eventually halted Imperial expansion.

An example of Captain Burke's forward thinking is illustrated by a comparison of destroyer employment prior to WW II and surface operations at the conclusion of the Solomon Islands Campaign. Traditionally, a cruiser-destroyer force would move in a column with the destroyers in the front and the cruisers to the rear. This formation created a line-of-battle that was intended for use in a war-at-sea engagement. Normally the destroyers sighted the enemy first. But, since cruiser admirals were hesitant to delegate offensive weapons release authority to destroyer captains and wanted target identification with absolute certainty, the destroyers lost the opportunity to fire by the time permission was granted to do so. When an engagement finally commenced, the destroyers maneuvered to stand clear of American cruiser guns. In hindsight, the DDs lost the element of surprise when they could have inflicted great damage to the enemy.

Captain Burke's new destroyer fighting concept capitalized on the raw courage that the DDs had shown throughout the Pacific War. They were based on the destroyers striking first, at night, with the element of surprise, and the authority to shoot without permission. Burke split his forces into two parallel columns, or divisions. The first



division to gain contact with an enemy force would immediately engage with torpedoes then sprint from the area to avoid the Japanese Long Lance torpedoes. The remaining division would simultaneously close the enemy, who would be reacting to the initial attack, and bring guns to bear. This tactic disorganized the enemy and prevented him from aiming torpedoes at gun flashes. When Japanese combatants fired counter battery to American guns, the first division would re-engage with guns from their opposite side.<sup>4</sup> These tactics, with two small columns instead of one, were ideally suited for the littoral waters of the Solomon Islands. However, the most unconventional dimension of this concept was not the break from traditional formation steaming but the approval of a small destroyer division to commence action without permission. This became known as Arleigh Burke's Doctrine of Faith; it illustrated perfectly the importance of a common and relevant approach for individual unit training.

The Solomon Islands Campaign offers an historical look at how the U.S. Navy adapted to an operational environment in which it was not prepared to fight. Through strong leadership and bold command and control methods, a lapse in training and preparation were overcome to stop Japanese aggression and reverse the course of the war in the Pacific.

In the present day, the U.S. Navy faces the identical scenario with respect to its preparation and readiness to fight in the littorals. Conceptually, the Navy recognizes that future naval action will occur close to land. Still, just as observed in the Solomon Islands Campaign, the training and certification of combatant ships for this environment is lacking. That is to say, there is inconsistency in the U.S. Navy's vision of future combat and the means in which modern surface combatants prepare for overseas deployment.

## The Vision

In September 1992, in the wake of a forty-year standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, the U.S. Navy published a concept paper entitled *From the Sea*. For the first time in decades, a conceptual change was made in the way naval leaders viewed the environment in which the Navy would operate in the next century. With the demise of the Soviet military, conflict on the high seas became an unrealistic expectation. Therefore, potential conflict shifted to confined waters bordered by land. In theory, naval forces would concentrate more on capabilities in the complex operating environment of the "littoral" or coastlines of the earth. It was recognized that a period of enormous uncertainty was approaching and that the naval strategy had shifted from a focus on a global threat to a focus on regional challenges and opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

Although a fundamental shift from the open ocean to the confined waters of the littoral environment may seem rather simple, when considering the design and capabilities of current naval weapon systems and in-place operating procedures, this shift poses numerous new challenges. The surface combatants of the U.S. Navy are sophisticated weapon systems designed to engage a massive enemy fleet on the high seas. In the open ocean, target acquisition, tracking, and engagement are accomplished with very little ambiguity between who is friend and who is foe. Air and surface search radars are tuned to classify potentially hostile tracks regardless of their size, speed, and orientation to the force. In addition, the undersea search and surveillance problem is optimized through passive localization of relatively loud nuclear submarines. Conversely, in a littoral environment, these well rehearsed warship functions become

extremely complicated. For example, in a modern, multi-mission destroyer, merely locating an enemy ship and engaging with guns is an oversimplification of a very complex problem. That surface adversary must be classified as an enemy among numerous merchant and fishing vessels whose presence seriously confounds the surface picture.

When considering the airspace of the near-shore environment, its control presents a vital challenge to littoral operations. In the littorals, hostile aircraft will use the cover of landmasses while air search radars will be blanked by shadows produced over coastal terrain. Therefore, reaction times for ship self-defense will be on the order of seconds rather than minutes. So, even with the most elaborate technology, the littoral environment is a tough place to operate. Only continuous training and realistic exercises will enhance successful establishment of air supremacy in coastal waters.

*From the Sea* recognizes these challenges. It states that the littoral region is characterized by confined and congested waters and air space occupied by friends, adversaries, and neutrals – making identification profoundly difficult. This environment poses varying technical and tactical challenges to naval forces. At the same time, the Navy's concept paper emphasizes that mastery of the littoral should not be presumed and it does not derive directly from command of the high seas.<sup>6</sup> In order to realize near-term success in the littoral environment, the U.S. Navy has made a corresponding shift of emphasis toward accelerating the adaptation of existing forces to cover littoral threats.

The U.S. Navy published its second concept paper in 1994 to update and expand the strategic concepts articulated in the 1992 paper. *Forward...From the Sea* reaffirms the Navy's change in focus. It prioritizes away from operating on the sea and shifts toward

power projection ashore and the employment of naval forces to influence events in the littoral regions of the world. It also addresses the specific and unique contributions of naval expeditionary forces in peacetime operations, in responding to crisis, and in regional conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

As a means of greater focus and as a bridge to the Department of Defense restructuring efforts, in 1997 the Chief of Naval Operations published a third paper entitled *Forward...From the Sea: The Navy Operational Concept*. This final, executive-level concept paper promulgates guidance on operational primacy – the ability to carry out swiftly and effectively any naval, joint, or coalition mission and to prevail decisively over any foe that may oppose us.<sup>8</sup> It describes the role of the Joint Force Commander and the necessity for him to arrive on the scene, fully prepared, to “plug” into a netted command and control system. Furthermore, emphasis is given to the importance of the role of new information technologies when relaying how the Navy will fight and win. Terminology such as speed of command, high-tempo continuum, and overwhelming effects are taken directly from governing network-centric warfare documents to explain how naval forces will strategically lockout the enemy. New technologies are introduced; the Navy’s Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC) will provide an unprecedented level of battlespace awareness. And, new missions are described; the Navy will compliment land-based systems for theater air defense and ballistic missile defense.

Through extensive documentation, the U.S. Navy has recognized the necessity to operate in a joint organization with geographical constraints. Its concept papers have set the direction for future naval methods while capturing the fundamentals of joint expectations in the littorals. However, when naval operators seek direction below the

executive level, clear guidance becomes antiquated. In other words, the process that is in place to prepare naval combatants for littoral conflict seems contradictory to the overarching concepts in which the Navy has embraced on a higher level. It appears that vision has not evolved into doctrine. Before identifying specific training areas that need renovation, it is important to understand the doctrine that does exist today. It is broad and fundamentally sound but lacks clarity and agreement with the vision of future surface warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Consequently, standard procedures for littoral fighting do not exist.

## **The Doctrine**

In today's Defense Department, there is a very well defined hierarchy of military doctrine that describes the manner in which joint operations will be conducted in the future. The Joint Publication Library is derived from the Joint Chief's vision, *Joint Vision 2010*, which established a conceptual template intended to guide the continuing transformation of America's armed forces in a post-Cold War environment. It's primary ideal of full spectrum dominance, which includes the principles of dominant maneuver, precision engagement, focused logistics, and full dimensional protection, provide a framework for all services to shape their transformation strategies.

Recently, *Joint Vision 2010* has been updated with *Joint Vision 2020*. This revised document builds upon the concepts of *Joint Vision 2010* but centers upon the development of new capabilities and modernization of the existing force. Its vehicle for technological growth is a wide-ranging program of exercises and experimentation

conducted by the services and combatant commanders that will boost the evolution of the joint force.<sup>9</sup>

As an executive summarization of joint considerations, *Joint Publication One* describes the reasons why it is important for America's armed forces to perform as a team during peacetime and crisis. It illustrates the fundamental principles of joint warfare and emphasizes its value through historical examples of success and unity of purpose. This publication is designed as an overview of how the United States Department of Defense will organize and operate its forces based upon the concepts of *Joint Vision 2010/2020*.

From a building-block perspective, *Joint Publication One* serves as a lead-in to the next tier of joint publications. With respect to joint operations, *Joint Publication Three* mirrors *Joint Publication One* in format but focuses on the planning and coordination of the Joint Task Force. In theory, each service should look to *Joint Publication Three* and model its doctrinal publications for operations through this joint framework. In terms of compliance with this doctrinal development process, the U.S. Navy has excelled by producing *Naval Doctrine Publication One (NDP-1) – Naval Warfare*. NDP 1 describes the ways naval forces accomplish their missions and execute their roles as part of the joint military team of the future.<sup>10</sup> The principles of war are described from the naval perspective and it translates the vision and strategy of *From the Sea* into doctrinal reality. However, the Naval Doctrine Publication system is, by its nature, an overview description of how the Navy should conduct its business into the next century. It does not provide the level of granularity that is required for planning and executing real-world naval operations.

On the other hand, a long-standing reference for naval operations is the Naval Warfare Publication (NWP) System. Throughout the Cold War, these documents have been developed through tactical experimentation. They describe, in sufficient detail, how naval commanders should prepare and conduct operations at sea. With these publications and battlegroup operations task messages (OPTASK), it is feasible for shipboard commanders to develop instructions for their individual commands to train and fight. Once individual ships are proficient in independent operations, they may proceed through the process of deployment work-ups. *The Surface Force Training Manual* details this process and all training requirements for overseas deployment. The manual progresses from the basic phase of training (individual ship requirements) to the intermediate phase (battlegroup integration) then to the advanced phase (Joint Task Force Exercise). Unfortunately, the advanced phase of training is where the future concepts of naval operations have not penetrated the training realities of naval surface warfare. Therefore, deploying naval forces routinely prepare to fight an obsolete battle on the high seas rather than a future conflict in the enemy's back yard.

## **The Reality**

Ships within a battle group are required to complete various levels of training in order to be integrated into the force. Once all of these requirements are met, the battlegroup must demonstrate its proficiency to operate in a projected overseas environment. The manner in which this is done is through a graduation-level exercise conducted by a CONUS-based fleet commander. The Joint Task Force Exercise (JTFEX) is designed to certify the battlegroup for overseas deployment.

For the past decade, these exercises have taken place in the operating areas surrounding the continental United States and have been designed to simulate a Middle Eastern conflict. They are quite sophisticated and relatively complex. Since the exercise events are scenario-driven, there is a real sense of cause and effect at all levels of decision-making from the battlegroup commander to individual ship commanding officers. Synthetic geography is used on a force-wide common operating picture that simulates the factors of space and time that will be experienced in the Persian Gulf and surrounding waters. All of this provides effective training for afloat forces; however, one could argue that these efforts are focused on the last war and neglect the realities and vision of the next conflict.

During the JTFEX, combatant ships execute traditional style warfare in accordance with NWP and battlegroup OPTASKs. This includes anti-air warfare, anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, etc. Routinely, Blue Force ships focus on long-range detection, classification, and targeting of the Orange Force in a maneuver war-at-sea that is scored by attrition of the opposing ships. The best example of this conventional thinking is the conduct of anti-surface warfare through the employment of the Harpoon Missile System. This weapon was designed to hit a target in the open ocean with no background shipping and minimal surface traffic between the shooter and the target. It is launched from up to seventy miles away from its intended target with a seeker that cannot distinguish between enemy forces and civilian maritime vessels. This is clearly a Cold War weapon for use on the high seas. It is extremely capable for its intended purpose but would not be the weapon of choice in a littoral environment where the enemy will surely mask himself within crowded traffic patterns.



More obsolescence is seen in the JTFEX through the lack of near-shore surface combatant activity. Normally, there is an absence of ship vs. ship combat in the littorals. Gun engagements are few and mostly conducted out at sea. In addition, Orange Forces are full-scale surface combatants with similar size, capability, and numbers as the Blue Forces. Defense against multiple, cruise missile armed, high speed, covert, coastal patrol craft is exercised as an exception and not the rule.

Through careful study of the JTFEX scenario, there is noticeable diversity between the Navy's vision of littoral warfare and the certification of surface combatants for forward-deployed operations. This should not be interpreted as battlegroups not being ready to deploy; they are. However, the training of multi-mission surface combatant ships should be refocused to develop proficiency in littoral combat. This can be accomplished at little cost through creative change to the schoolhouse solution.

## **Recommendation**

Since history provides such vast examples of adaptability as a means to capture victory, the U.S. Navy should look to the past, identify common shortfalls, and emulate behavioral trends that proved successful in the past. In the Solomon Islands example, naval surface combatants were ill-prepared for night action against an enemy with the technological advantage. Not proficient to fight in the near-shore environment, naval leaders were forced to make adjustments that reversed the momentum of war in the Southwestern Pacific region.

Although today's global atmosphere is less hostile, it has the potential for small pockets of conflict to erupt over widely dispersed areas. Naval analysts have agreed on

this and have defined the environment in which future fighting will likely occur. Just as in the Solomon Islands of 1942, littoral combat for surface ships is a future reality. So, the near-term challenge is to provide realistic littoral training in this projected environment. Although today's modern combatants were designed to fight on the high seas, they can effectively execute a near-shore mission if they are adequately prepared to do so.

The current JTFEX model provides a good starting place for littoral training. Small modifications to the current scenario, with strong emphasis on littoral fighting, would pay great dividends for the combatant forces. For example, the synthetic geography could be changed to reflect a Solomon-like environment for cruisers and destroyers to train. Or, more effectively, the JTFEX could be conducted in actual island regions (West Indian Islands) where real landmasses could be used for scenario-driven surveillance, tracking, and engagement of enemy forces. Here, shipboard sensors would behave just as they would in overseas littoral environments. Shallow water anti-submarine challenges would be present along with air search radar limitations severely reducing self-defense reaction times. Also, new technologies such as CEC would be flexed to their limits in an island-marked seascape that greatly changes their performance from laboratory expectations to real-world sub-optimization.

If the surface training scenario were modified after the Solomon Islands Campaign, naval surface combatant ships would be better prepared for the environment that the U.S. Navy envisions for future operations. In doing so, tactics should be developed and standard procedures documented. Soon, doctrine would exist for surface littoral combat. In simple terms, the critical components of change must be a realistic scenario reflecting

near-shore engagements. This training environment should be modeled after a future battlespace but based upon historical examples of achievement.

Another method for enhancement of the training quality is the utilization of numerous small craft that would simulate armed coastal patrol craft. This is not a new concept to naval surface warfare training. These vessels have been used with great success in past methods of refresher training. If several coordinated "squadrons" of fast patrol craft were utilized as Orange Forces throughout an island training campaign, surface combatants would experience a much more challenging exercise than they currently see in today's JTFEX.

With the end of the Cold War and the recognition of future naval combat, the U.S. Navy has been given a venue for preparation of its combatant warships for hostile engagement. Unfortunately, there has been a lag in the modification to the training process. When projecting into tomorrow's potentially violent settings, it is not difficult to imagine a conflict between Greece and Turkey where the United States Navy finds itself on patrol in the Aegean Sea. With hundreds of small islands to clutter the surface picture, any shortfall in littoral proficiency could be magnified with potentially catastrophic results.

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. Navy's link to the past provides a resource for harnessing lessons learned and adapting them to future operations. In that context, by investigating historical events, an intellectual anchor is formed from which introspective analysis may occur. Just as tradition is used to mold naval culture, history offers a laboratory for erudition. By exploring the Solomon Islands Campaign and identifying similarities between afloat

littoral combat during WW II and possible future regional conflicts, it becomes clear that the U.S. Navy must improve the realism in surface combatant training. Also, advances must be made to naval doctrine for more agreed-upon guidance for operations in the littorals. With that, training methods will become more realistic and near-shore surface warfare proficiency will be achieved.

Since the U.S. Navy will operate near landmasses at the disadvantage of regional familiarity, mastery of close-quarters combat must be realized before the shooting begins. And, if naval dominance remains centered around projecting power from the sea, the Navy must dominate every nautical mile of enemy coastline. Therefore, realistic training reinforced by congruent doctrine is the vehicle to transform surface warfare operations from the high seas to the littorals. By using history as a window to the past, scrutiny of its events could forecast the future. In the final analysis, creative changes to complex training scenarios will secure combatant victory in the world's littoral regions. For command of the seas, it is time to seize the moment before lessons are relearned through unnecessary loss and inexcusable defeat.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Rasor, Eugene L., The Solomon Islands Campaign: Guadalcanal to Rabul. Pg. 21
  - <sup>2</sup> Koburger, Charles W., Pacific Turning Point: The Solomon Islands Campaign. Pg. 68
  - <sup>3</sup> Ibid Pg. 89
  - <sup>4</sup> Kilpartick, C.W., The Naval Night Battles of the Solomons. Pg. 100
  - <sup>5</sup> From The Sea Pg. 1
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid pg 5
  - <sup>7</sup> Forward...From The Sea Pg. 1
  - <sup>8</sup> Forward...From The Sea: The Navy Operational Concept Pg. 1
  - <sup>9</sup> Joint Vision 2020 Pg. 3
  - <sup>10</sup> Naval Doctrine Publication One – Naval Warfare Pg. iv

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